



Self-giving as the authentic call of the Christian:

A response to Catriona Fletcher

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In her reflections, Catriona Fletcher points to the need for a total ministering community which reaches out to people in a changing world. This outreach must come from an authentic centre, a 'taproot', which is a deep relationship between the persons of the community and the God to whom they have committed themselves. Hospitality, community and authenticity were three of the oft used words throughout the "Exploring Mission in Scotland Today" conference. Another key term that emerged was generosity.

In this section, I want to focus on the idea of authenticity as restatement and renewal and conclude that self-giving is the authentic call of the Christian. I do this from within the Roman Catholic tradition.



Some core values

Part of the discussion that followed Catriona's presentation at the Conference centred on the tension between outreach and core Christian values, in other words, the question asked was, do we compromise on belief to be relevant? An illustration of the Washing of the Feet as representing the Church was one of those proffered by Catriona as she brought us together at the beginning of the seminar. In the intimate atmosphere of the Last Supper, the disciples also experienced confusion and even horror. Jesus bridged the 'gap' between the announcement of his departure and reassurance for the disciples by his act of self-giving which symbolised his person and mission.¹ It

was this self-giving which transformed the situation and the disciples. Pope John Paul II in both his Letter on Holy Thursday, *Dominicae Cenae*² and his Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation, *Pastores Dabo Vobis*³ (PDV) restates the requirement of the ordained priest to live up to the demands of charity. In PDV, he explicitly talks of ‘pastoral charity’ as the ‘internal principle’ of the ministry of the presbyter in the Roman Catholic tradition.⁴ This pastoral charity, this self-giving, is specifically orientated towards the preaching of the Gospel, the celebration of the sacraments, and acts of forgiveness for and within the Church. Without it, the priest lacks energy and personal renewal. Two of the principle documents from Vatican II, *Lumen Gentium*, on the Church, and *Gaudium et Spes*, on the Church in the world, identify the task of Christians as bringing the world to God by ministering in the world.⁵ If the pattern of ministry for laity as well as clergy is taken as pastoral charity to the world, then the effective ministerial instrument is outreach in love towards those in need.⁶



Restatement and renewal

Modern Roman Catholic theologians have stressed the need to live God to understand God.⁷ Who God is determines the way we live and minister as the people of God. The Spirit is revealed as the ‘subjective’ element in our lives. It is the Spirit who inspires, drives and encourages the gifts within us and whom we first encounter, as it were, in both our prayer and our outreach. Being poured out upon the Church and the world, the mutual connection between us and those to whom we seek to minister is the Holy Spirit. The Spirit reminds us of all that Christ is and has said (John 16:12–15). Bearing the personality of Christ, he focuses us on the objective content of our faith, which is, in fact, a person, the crucified and risen Lord who is present to us in our acts of imitating his example. Through embracing Christ, we become one with him and start to realise that we are here to do exactly what he did: journey back to the Father from whom we came and bring back as many of our brothers and sisters as we can out of darkness into light (1 Peter 2:9). This pattern of ministry fits into the ‘gift and return’ model developed by, among others, the late Edward Kilmartin.⁸ The Father sends the Son and the Spirit out as pure gift, as we return this

gift in giving of ourselves, we return to the Father from whom all good things come. This means that outreach in pastoral charity is not simply something that is ‘good to do’, but participates in God himself; to know God is to do God, to draw life from him is to do what he does. If we do not do what he does, then we cannot draw life from him.

I believe that this is what Pope Francis has tried to emphasise in his ministry and preaching as exemplified by Catriona’s quote at the beginning of this article. In fact, he has been putting into plain words the teaching developed by his predecessors since Pope John XXIII, while articulating his own ministerial experience. The lack of energy among priests, referred to by Pope John Paul II in PDV, has now been ‘called out’ on the rest of the Church by Pope Francis. As Pope, he has not denied the importance of traditional doctrine, but he has pointed all Christians (and people of good will) to the true source of energy and joy: missionary zeal. Only by looking out, do we realise what is most important about what is inside of us, the power and grace of the Spirit of Christ. This was the whole thrust of the Vatican II project.

Notes

- ¹ See David Ford, *Self and Salvation: Being Transformed* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 146–59.
- ² John Paul II, Apostolic Letter, *Dominicae Cenae*, AAS 72 (1980), 113–48.
- ³ John Paul II, Post Synodal Exhortation, *Pastores Dabo Vobis*, AAS 84 (1992), 657–84.
- ⁴ Ibid., 23.
- ⁵ Vatican II, The Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, *Lumen Gentium* 1, 4, 5, 13 et al.; Pastoral Constitution in the World of Today, *Gaudium et Spes*, 1–3 et al. Texts can be found in Norman P. Tanner, ed., *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils*, vol. 2 (London: Sheed & Ward, 1990), 849–98; 1069–1135. The official texts can be found in vols. 1–4 of the *Acta Synodalia Concilii Vaticani II* (Vatican City, 1970–83).
- ⁶ See also PDV 15–16.

- ⁷ For example, see David Coffey, *Grace: The Gift of the Holy Spirit* (Sydney: Catholic Institute of Sydney, 1979); Louis-Marie Chauvet, *The Sacraments, the Word of God at the Mercy of the Body* (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 2001); Edward J. Kilmartin, *Christian Liturgy: Theology and Practice: vol. 1, Systematic Theology of Liturgy* (Kansas City, Mo.: Sheed & Ward, 1988).
- ⁸ Kilmartin, *Christian Liturgy*.